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Use of social media apps linked to feelings of isolation during Covid-19

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According to a recent study, the use of online messaging and social media apps among Singapore residents has spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was led by Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore).

Three in four respondents (75 per cent) said that their use of WhatsApp during the pandemic increased. This was followed by Telegram (60.3 per cent), Facebook (60.2 per cent) and Instagram (59.7 per cent).

Accompanying this spike is videoconferencing fatigue, found the NTU Singapore study, which surveyed 1,606 Singapore residents from December 17 to 31 last year. Nearly one in two Singapore residents (44 per cent) said they felt drained from videoconferencing activities, which became more frequent during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Some 86 per cent of the respondents reported that their use of videoconferencing tools increased during the pandemic.

The increased use of online communication tools could in part be driven by feelings of isolation, said the researchers. When asked how often they felt they lacked companionship,

35 per cent of the respondents indicated they have felt this way sometimes, while 19 per cent felt this way often or very often. Some 32 per cent also reported feeling left out sometimes, while 18 per cent said they felt left out often or very often.

The nationwide online study looking at the new normal following the COVID-19 outbreak is commissioned by the Centre for Information Integrity and the Internet (IN-cube), a new research centre at NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information (WKWSCI) and conducted by a local polling company.

Associate Professor Edson C Tandoc Jr, the Director at IN-cube said, "The significant correlation between the use of online communication tools and isolation">feelings of isolation from the survey results may help explain why most of our respondents reported an increase in their use of online communication tools in the past few months, as they turn to these tools to feel connected to others even when physical interactions have to be limited.

"Social interaction through these online communication tools definitely brings about new challenges. Some may feel as if they are always on call at work or among their friends. Others may be uncomfortable with turning their cameras on during a video call or may not have a stable internet connection. With these difficulties and limitations in mind, we need to be mindful of our expectations of others when we are using these tools or when we ask others to use them," Tandoc Jr added.

The IN-cube survey also found that nearly two in three (63.1 per cent) Singapore residents think that the COVID-19 situation will improve this year, with six in 10 (60.6 per cent) looking forward to traveling out of Singapore.

One in four respondents also indicated plans to make high-value purchases after the pandemic, such as buying luxury bags, cars, or property. However, this optimism about the COVID-19 situation improving comes with a tinge of caution. Some 68.7 per cent said they would likely or very likely continue to avoid places with large public gatherings while 68.5 per cent said they would continue to engage in social distancing even after the pandemic is over.

Face masks may also remain commonplace, as 64 per cent said they would continue to wear face masks outdoors even after COVID-19, while 62 per cent said they are likely or very likely to continue to work from home whenever possible, even after the pandemic. NTU Assistant Professor Edmund Lee, Assistant Director at IN-cube said, "The intention of Singaporeans to avoid large public gatherings - even though they believe that COVID-19 situation will improve - is a positive indication that people are still remaining vigilant as they adapt to the new normal.

"The challenge is how we can avoid becoming victims of our own success, ensuring that people do not get 'COVID-19 fatigue' and let their guard down as Singapore gradually opens up to the world," Edmund Lee added.